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ABSTRACT

A variety of components that operate in tutoring writing are examined in this paper. Discussed are (1) the importance of the tutor's language, tone of voice, and verbal interaction with the students: (2) active listening techniques: (3) establishing an atmosphere of trust and acceptance: (4) helping students develop a framework for understanding their writing problems: and (5) establishing a flexible environment with a number of learning options such as free writing, journals, or sentence combining. (AEA)

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Tutoring Writing: Examining The Process

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In The Process of Education, Jerome Bruner explains that understanding the underlying principles of a subject makes it more comprehensible. Bruner points out that successful teaching demands the exploration of all aspects of a topic and the underlying principles interacting upon it so that students can relate the components systematically. Another closely related assumption is that all learning situations contain some kind of structure and that each structure regardless of its nature "imposes a set of conditions" on the learner (Judy, 1975). Although each of these premises pertains to curricular concerns, each is useful for all educators especially for those who train tutors. Using both premises, we can begin to examine some of the components operating in the tutoring of writing.

Many educators (Smith, E.B., 1961, Bellack, 1966, Thelens, 1963) maintain that language is one of the most important structures operating in the teaching process. Language according to Smith "is the major vehicle of expression and exchange of ideas in any teaching situation."[1] Aschner insists that:

> Few indeed are the acts of teaching that entail no verbal dimension, that proceed without some verbal interplay between the teacher and the student. For just as the act of teaching however else defined is an effort to induce learning so is the language of teaching a tap root for learning.[2]

Obviously in this view, teaching and learning are synonymous. Both involve the sending of verbal signals and messages, a kind of constant exchange between the teacher and the learner. Without language, instruction and learning can be handicapped or restrained.

Just as the language of instruction can restrain learning, so can the tutor's language motivate or repress it. A phrase by a tutor at an appropriate moment can be encouraging while an inappropriate one can be threatening, create anger and frustration and turn off the entire listening and learning process. The tutor's voice serves a similar function. Loudness may denote anger or hostility while a lower tone may suggest a calm relaxed feeling. The rate or tempo may show uncertainty, annoyance or anxiety. A simple statement of assistance may imply several different meanings depending on the intensity, pitch or tempo of the voice.

[1] E. Brooks, Smith, Kenneth Goodman and Robert Meredith. Language and Thinking in the Elementary School (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1970) p 319.

[2] Mary Jane Aschner "The Language of Teaching" Language and Concepts in Education (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1961) p 113

When a tutor and a student come together, the tutor assumes the authority, and the relationship between the two is essentially a superior-subordinate one. The student expects the tutor to take charge and to initiate and control the learning tasks. In order to do so, the tutor uses language to establish certain overt pedagogical ground rules that govern how the tasks are to be implemented. The tutor, for instance, identifies goals, selects assignments, sets time limits and defines the tone and nature of the relationship. In a similar manner, tutor uses managerial language to direct tasks and give directions so that the information is presented in some logical manner.

Tutors also use language strategies to solicit ideas or information that establishes the context for subsequent behaviors. They use questions that act as a catalyst for initiating the learner's process of self reflection and thought regarding a piece of writing. The questions also enable the student to make discoveries and to gain fresh insights into how to turn the essay into a much improved final product.

Finally, there are evaluative and judgmental language behaviors which tutors employ to issue praises, reprimands and piecemeal advice. Each of these verbal acts assesses the learner's written skills and may be psychologically damaging or encouraging depending on the language and circumstances in

which it is given. The emotional impact of these statements on the learner may also vary depending on whether the learner perceives the tutor as being supportive and whether he credits the tutor with giving an honest appraisal of his strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

As we discuss the role of language in instruction, we must keep in mind that language is more than a mechanism for controlling behavior (Norris, 1946). Man's thoughts about himself, his environment and everything that occurs in it are expressed in language of some kind. Anything that a tutor thinks whether negative or positive is conveyed through language of some kind. When we consider that a great deal of her feelings are expressed unconsciously through nonverbal gestures and facial expressions, we can begin to understand the tremendous influence that language has in instruction and the extraordinary amount of control that tutors can exert because of it.

Though the tutor controls the tasks through his use of language, learning is a two way process involving an interpersonal relationship between the tutor and the learner (Garner, 1961). Tutors and students must both talk and respond to each other. As the amount of teacher involvement increases so does the amount of student involvement. Each represents two different aspects of one learning process. Much of how the student responds and learns depends on the nature of the interaction and the involvement that the teacher establishes. The student must become personally involved, reacting emotionally and rationally to the tutor and to other structures in his environment. He must inquire about his perceptions compare and reorganize them in a manner that fits his present circumstances.

In many ways, the learning situation is likened to responding to a literary experience. Everyone as Steinbeck observes "takes what he wants or can from it an thus changes it to his measure".[3] Students who are acquiring delayed language skills react to their environment in a similar manner. Each responds to the tutoring process--picking out parts that he likes and discarding the rest. As the students work with tutors, they begin to apply bits and pieces of information gleaned from discussions, revisions and writing assignments. As they respond and react to what they are digesting, they learn how their current paper stack up against previous ones by raising questions about the content, the flow of their sentences and the appropriateness of their words.

[3]John Steinbeck. The Winter of Our Discontent. New York: Viking Press, 1961

This kind of learning does not occur unless the tutor employs active listening techniques. An active listener listens rather than hears-observing all aspects of the learner's behavior not just those that have been verbalized. The tutor attends to all behavior and assesses it while allowing the learner to express himself. The tutor also provides feedback that leads to further discussion and sharing of thought because he is able to identify problems that may block writing growth. To illustrate, when students are asked if they understand an instructor's comments regarding an essay, they frequently respond with a quivering nod of approval which a nonattentive tutor may perceive to mean that an agreement has been reached on the essay's problem. This passivity on the part of the student may also indicate a lack of understanding which suggests that the tutor ought to provide some kind of feedback in the form of a statement that shows empathy or one that probes further into the meaning of the learner's behavior. An active listener in this case would note the student's passivity and employ a procedure, perhaps questions that would provide him with some understanding of the learner's problems. The way in which the learner expresses any type of behavior can indicate a lack of comprehension or some difficulty with the material or the situation. The messages that students send show something about the blocks that may be interfering with their writing growth. Active listening enhances the tutoring process by permitting the tutor to provide feedback regarding all aspects of the learner's behavior.

Thom Hawkins describes a pattern of reading, spoken and written feedback as a method of responding to student writing:[4]

1. Read, Go over the paper twice if necesaary, but don't write any response yet. After the silent reading, the author will read the essay aloud.

2. Spoken feedback, Talk to the author. Tell him or her about the good things in the paper... Be supportive. There is nothing really bad about any piece of writing only parts which may not make sense to other people.

   Talk to each other...Listen to the author. There may be marginal notations that occur to you during your discussion.

3. Written feedback. Stop talking, the author needs a written record...Your larger view of the paper will be more helpful than the spelling and punctuation errors...

When each piece of writing is accepted with warmth and understanding, the student is not only made aware of his difficulties but knows that the tutor is willing to accept what he has written and is willing to assist him regardless of how poorly written the paper may be. From this basis of trust and understanding, the tutor can comment freely on each piece of writing and discuss writing principles in terms of how well they have been accomplished.

In this same atmosphere of trust and acceptance, the tutor can also point out the significance and necessity of making mistakes. Mistakes occur because choices are made as the student works toward completing the final product. Without choices and errors, there can be no writing or writing growth. The commission

[4]Thom Hawkins. Group Inquiry Techniques For Teaching Writing (Urbana, Illinois: The National Council of Teachers of English 1976) pp 29-30

of errors, some careless, others due to lack of knowledge, is an essential aspect of the writing process. Tutors can further remind their students that few writers write without the benefit of making mistakes and that every act of writing even those done by professionals does not result in a final successful product. Failures always occur, but these failures and the subsequent corrections and revisions are a part of writing growth.

To percipitate writing growth, the student must be able to establish some connection between the activities he experiences and what he perceives to be his writing problems. If he is unable to do so, less effort is exerted and the student suffers from a lack of motivation and interest. One of the primary reasons for this kind of failure is that too many students have been writing in isolation too long. Instead of engaging in meaningful written language experiences, they spend a great deal of time working on drills to improve particular language skills. Though these drills have a limited value, they are not synonymous with composing and the thinking through of an idea. Likewise, as valuable as sentence and paragraph practice happen to be, sentences and papagraphs are not end products in themselves. They are "building units" and are a part of a developmental sequence that forms " larger rhetorical constructs" (Rodgers, M.) Although a developmental sentence and paragraph sequence is needed in the teaching of writing, isolated practice apart from composing larger units of disclosure does little to foster writing growth. Tutors those who comprehend the relationship among all units of discourse

and who are able to make a series of sentences and paragraphs choices that lead to a final written product.

In his role as facilitator, the tutor guides the students in the selection of experiences that provide insights that are essential in learning to write. He does so by developing an atmosphere of mutual respect in which language and the exchange of ideas play a significant role. He also does so by providing students with opportunities to write--opportunities that are challenging but not contrived or artificial and with the proper environment that relates purpose to learning experiences. When students are able to accurately perceive their problems and themselves as capable of resolving them, efficient learning takes place.

In order for students to take an active part in any developmental language venture, they must comprehend the purpose of instruction and how it relates to the achievement of writing competence. If they are unable to do so, the tasks are frequently regarded as unintelligent and incompatible with their goals. (Smith, F.,1975)

Thus, the primary task of the tutor is to help the student to develop a framework for understanding his writing problems. Clarification is necessary because the tutor can not assume that both he and the student have the same perceptions and interpretations of what appears in the student's essay. First, poor writers because of their frustrations and anguish with writing usually have negative images of themselves and the composing process. Their preceptions are rarely realistic. Some choose too narrow a focus concentrating on insignificant punctuation errors that can be easily remedied by learning rules; others think too globally imagining that

their essays contain a host of unredeemable problems' Still others refuse to admit that problems exist and instead blame the university for demanding writing proficiency or a particular instructor's topics or instructional style, but most suffer from suppressed apprehensions and suspicions that inhibit their writing development. When the learners' perceptions of their problems differ greatly from the tutors' and from what their writing skills happen to be, a host of dysfunctional tutee styles may ensue. If the student, for example, believes his skills to be greater than what they actually are, the student may block out what the tutor is saying because he feels helpless against what he perceives to be the instructor's unrealistic demands to improve his writing. Misperceptions such as these often result in unresponsive, defensive or even hostile or sullen behavior. Involving students in a discussion clarifying their writing problems lessen possible conflicts that arise because of the student's misperceptions of their writing skills.

A second task that the tutor must accomplish is to establish an environment with a number of learning options. Literature on the influence of environment on the learner's behavior suggests that the best environment is one in which the learner is able to make some critical decisions about what he learns and how he learns it. (Adelman, 1977, Insel and Moos, 1974). The

environment must be flexible enough to permit the learner to exercise a series of options and choices for change if necessary. Such an environment will not only allow the learner to focus on relevant and interesting activities but will serve as a means of gaining and sustaining maximum student interest and participation. A variety of techniques, perhaps free writing, journals, sentence combining, paragraph practice, reading summaries, revision and editing assignments permit students to select those items that best fit their needs. This kind of environment is especially helpful for poor writers who must acquire several skills simultaneously usually in a short period of time. The rate in which many of these skills are attained can be increased when the student has aquired coping strategies which Hunt views as being induced by an environment in which many stimuli are present. (Hunt, 1961). A variety of learning tasks and procedures encourage and motivate coping strategies by reducing boredom and promoting the identification of tasks that benefit the learner psychologically and physically. Furthermore, when poor writers must change tasks because of completion or because of an unfulfilled expectancy of success, they can change and still preserve a sense of doing something worthwhile (Adelman, 1977). Different writing problems require the completion of different tasks which demand different commitments in terms of effort, time and type of performance. When goals and problems are clarified and many relevant learning options are provided, feelings of frustration, failure and

disappointment--behavior that interferes with learning--are minimized.

Determining the various structures and the extent and influence of their operations provides valuable data about the tutoring process and supplies an observational framework from which strategies and methods can be developed, tested and taught. When these "fundamentals" are learned, we as trainers will no longer have to rely on "foolproof methods," that will take care of all writing problems, we can begin to train our tutors to treat the multiplicity of individual differences that poor writers bring to our labs. Of course, our training sessions will always include discussion on content, instructional materials and techniques, but we can also discuss our observations and hypotheses about what poor writers find challenging, interesting, inspiring or dull. However, we must always keep in mind that in an atmosphere of mutual respect and encouragement, poor writers can compose, fully cognizant of the fact that their communications will be accepted, and that responses and criticisms are given as guidelines for improving their writing techniques. It is only in this supportive environment that we can hope to foster the communication process and dispel many of the fears and frustrations that poor writers associate with it.

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